Developing REAL inclusive teaching and learning at university for autistic students through dialogue: a participatory action research project

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Editorial comment

Jonathan is a lecturer in Education Studies and facilitates transition and social support for students on the autism spectrum, and provides staff training on inclusive teaching and learning. He argues that much of the current literature surrounding inclusive practice to support autistic students is authored by staff, parents or other stake-holders, rather than the individuals with the diagnosis themselves. The voices of autistic students were foregrounded in this study. The findings from student-staff dialogue are outlined and recommendations for more inclusive teaching and learning practice for autistic students are identified.

Introduction

According to the Equality Challenge Unit (2013), the number of students on the autism spectrum entering higher education is steadily increasing. The proportion of disabled students who declared a social communication or autism spectrum diagnosis to their university more than doubled from 0.9 per cent in 2007–2008 to 2.1 per cent in 2011–2012. In order to fully support these students, staff in higher education institutions (HEIs) must develop understanding about autism and how it affects students who identify with the diagnosis. However, much of the current literature surrounding inclusive practice is authored by researchers, parents or other stakeholders, rather than autistic individuals themselves (Madriaga and Goodley 2010). This paper seeks to redress this by outlining the first two cycles of a participatory action research project. The first cycle obtained data from the students themselves and the second cycle involved a workshop where staff discussed this data as part of an interactive workshop. This paper gives the theoretical background to the research, explains the research methods used in both cycles and then presents the findings from the student-staff dialogue. Recommendations are then made to achieve more inclusive practice for autistic students.

What would inclusive teaching and learning at university look like for autistic students?

Lipsky and Gartner (1996) define inclusive education for disabled students as:

> *"equitable opportunities for all learners to receive effective educational services, with supplementary aids to support, in age-appropriate classes in their neighbourhoods to prepare them for contributing lives as full members of society"* (page 764)

Thomas and May (2010) argue that the engagement of academic staff is central to developing inclusive learning and teaching in higher education institutions and research shows that there is a willingness to develop more accessible instructional practices (O'Connor et al, 2012; Smith, 2010). However, Mortimore (2013, page 40) claims that lecturers report "low confidence and experience in accommodating the needs of students with disabilities" and Pearson and Koppi (2006) cite a lack of understanding and training as the main barriers to inclusive practice. In relation to the inclusive practice for students on the autism spectrum, Madriaga and Goodley (2010, page 118) maintain that there has been a tendency to pathologise the individual by focusing on the 'problematic' nature of autism which has resulted in "a cautious attitude among HE staff in preparing for a worst-case scenario".

For Milton (2014), this accords with the medical or 'deficit' model of autism that he perceives as prevalent in much of the academic literature, interventions and media, where individuals are defined by their deviation from statistical or idealised norms of observed behaviour. By contrast, he and other autistic advocates (eg Robertson, 2009) prefer the concept of neurodiversity which suggests that variations in neurological development are simply part of natural diversity. In this sense, autistic individuals possess a blend of cognitive strengths and difficulties across a range of core domains including language, communication, and social interaction; sensory processing; motor skill execution; and goal-oriented and reflexive thinking, planning, and self-regulation. Both Milton (2014) and Robertson (2009) contend that although there are indeed embodied differences, these are contextual and frequently the result of the interaction between an ableist society and individual impairments. Thus, understanding the insider perspectives of autistic university students is salient in challenging the disabling structures in higher education and improving practice.

To date, there is only a small body of emancipatory research published which foregrounds the voices of students with autism. The largest of its kind, Beardon et al's (2009) study, explored the perceptions of 238 adults on the autistic spectrum to discover more about their experiences of university or college. It identified four main areas of challenge including social interaction; the social environment; other people's understanding of Asperger syndrome / high functioning autism; and course structure and curriculum requirements. Similar themes are also identified by Hastwell et al (2012) and Madriaga and Goodley (2010). In keeping with the neurodiversity model, it is argued that the individual differences are not the 'problem' per se; rather, it is the lack of awareness, understanding or will by universities to respond in an inclusive way that is the issue.

Developing REAL inclusive practice

Milton (2014) suggests that an inclusive education setting based on the neurodiversity model would not focus on perceived deficits or 'inappropriate' behaviours. Rather he writes, what would be emphasised would be

> *"an understanding of differing dispositions, a building of relationships in a respectful manner, engaging with an individual's abilities and interests and not just what they find difficult"* (page 11)

A useful example of inclusive practice of this kind is the REAL model, established by Martin (2008). Her study is based on the experiences of 117 practitioners in 17 UK universities working with 110 students with Asperger syndrome and is framed around four central tenets that capture the essence of inclusive support for students on the autistic spectrum. These are Reliable, Empathic, Anticipatory and Logical (REAL). Martin (2008) understands reliability to be central to effective services, where a student can trust in the level and consistency of support offered to them. Empathy requires peers and staff to attempt to embrace the world view of the autistic individual. Anticipatory, likewise, relates to an awareness of the diverse needs of the students and emphasises forward planning in order to mitigate distress or anxiety. Finally, logical refers to practice that is clear, predictable, and has tangible expectations. It is suggested that these four tenets could be applied specifically to inclusive teaching and learning and

offers an empirically based approach that is pragmatic and focuses on issues surrounding inclusive practice rather than the individual.

Methods

This paper represents an ongoing Participatory Action Research (PAR) project with university students on the autistic spectrum. Its aim is to make higher education more inclusive by engaging the students as co-researchers and critical agents of change. PAR falls within the broader family of action research and has its foundation in Kurt Lewin's systematic enquiry through democratic participation and Freire's (1970) critical epistemology. The approach emphasises the construction of expertise and validity through the life stories of those who experience oppression, rather than by the professional researcher or 'expert'. This agentic approach to knowledge production fits appositely within the social model of disability in leading to the

> *"systematic demystification of the structures and processes which create disability and the establishment of a workable 'dialogue' between the research community and disabled people in order to facilitate the latter's empowerment"* (Barnes 1992, page 122).

Cycle one: students' voices

The first cycle involved establishing the Stratus Writers Project. This was set up in 2013 as a means of discovering autistic students' insider perspectives of university. The project made use of critical autobiographical narratives (Griffiths, 1994) where individual narratives are mixed with theory and reflection about politically situated realities. In all, six undergraduate students and one recent graduate took part in the project and together they explored various areas of experience, including: the first week of university; socialising; emotional experiences; studying abroad; teaching and learning. This qualitative data was collected and analysed by the students themselves, alongside the academic facilitator (and author), in order to understand more about their shared experiences and specific areas of challenge at university. In keeping with the participatory nature of the project, the findings have been written up in a separate co-authored paper (Vincent et al, in press) and with permission anonymised transcripts published on the university website. Moreover, the students have also been involved in the wider dissemination of the findings and co-presented at an international academic conference.

Cycle two: staff reflections on the students' accounts

Since the start of the project two years ago, almost all of the students involved in cycle one have graduated and left the university. So in the second participatory action research cycle, their autobiographical accounts were used with members of staff as part of a workshop on inclusive teaching and learning. In total, 22 members of staff voluntarily participated, including lecturers, heads of programmes, support staff and professors. Extracts from the students' accounts were printed onto large sheets of paper which were spread around a room. Staff had the opportunity to read, discuss and annotate the extracts with suggestions of how they could make their practice more inclusive based on their new understanding. In this sense a 'dialogic space' (Wegerif, 2013) was established by engaging staff in the pedagogic experiences of students on the autism spectrum. Wegerif contends that dialogue has external and internal dimensions. He writes that external dialogue is situated in time and space but "on the inside of the dialogue we might be talking about people who are not present, distant places and past or future events" (2013, page 4). This metaphorical space allows even those who are not present to be part of the dialogue and so the voices of the students, albeit physically in absentia, are active participants.

Findings

Martin's (2008) REAL model was used as an analytical frame with the intention of identifying reliable, empathetic, anticipatory and logical solutions to inclusive pedagogic practice. In keeping with an emancipatory approach, effort has been made to foreground the voices of the participants (students and staff) in the production of new knowledge.

Reliable

As Martin (2008) found, the importance of consistency, in terms of teaching and learning, is paramount. Comments made by students and staff included:

> ***Student:*** *"I generally liked the lectures, seminars and workshops. Usually the teachers seemed to be well prepared, and they had often written material in the form of hand outs or different lecture notes on a screen and other things to read during the time we met them in class, and this helped making the lessons interesting and easy to follow."*
>
> ***Staff:*** "*Where Aspergers students know what to expect this seems to be effective."*
>
> ***Staff:*** *"How can we ensure that 'best (inclusive) practice' is consistent across the university in terms of materials and enabling support?"*

Staff acknowledged that the good practice identified by the autistic students was effective for all students and began to consider how this could be applied more generally across the institution, fitting with a broader understanding of inclusive education.

Empathetic

Students identified a lack of understanding about autism and Asperger syndrome among members of staff. It is clear from the comment below how a lack of knowledge about the diversity of students' needs is directly linked to forms of teaching and learning that are not considered 'autism-friendly'.

> ***Student:*** *"I also think that the staff members… in general should learn more about autism, including Asperger's syndrome, and they should learn about concrete actions they can take to make their lectures, seminars and workshops more autism-friendly, like preparing the students for what is happening in the lessons well in advance, having lots of written materials in the lessons, and using concrete language and many detailed examples in their teaching. This would be a big part of helping the students with autism in their academic work, I believe."*
>
> ***Staff:*** *"Academic staff actually want better understanding of how to support AS students and how to be inclusive – could this be part of broader staff training / development?"*

The exchange below between a student and a member of staff shows how this lack of knowledge and empathy can be a barrier to disclosure. This can then effectively cut off support that could have enabled a more positive experience of learning.

> ***Student:*** *"As far as I know, most of my lecturers aren't aware that I'm autistic. It's not easy approaching people to tell them you find certain things difficult, or have additional needs…When I started university I had only recently been diagnosed and wasn't comfortable talking about my autism at all. If I were to go back and start again, I'd seek support to talk to academic staff about my needs and difficulties from the outset, rather than avoid talking about it."*
>
> ***Staff:*** *"I think that it is good that academic staff are perceived as being supportive in this process but it's sad that this student didn't feel they could disclose their needs…we need to develop ways that enable students to openly discuss their learning needs and create supportive channels in programmes and departments."*

Members of staff acknowledge this gap in knowledge and express a desire to garner better understanding of autistic students' needs and levels of empathy. Moreover, they began to proactively consider how this might be achieved practically within academic contexts.

Anticipatory

The start of university or beginning a new course was considered challenging for some of the students, especially where a network of support was not yet in place. One student reflected on how anticipatory steps could have been taken to support him in those initial learning encounters.

> ***Student:*** *"It would have beneficial if I had been able to meet with one or two of my lecturers before (starting the course). Even just seeing a face that I could look out for and recognise on the first day rather than everything and everyone to be brand new and scary would have made a difference.*

It is clear that for staff this level of need was not recognised and therefore not accounted for in their practice. However, rather than focusing on the student's 'problem' with social interactions, they made a number of practical and anticipatory recommendations that could make a difference.

> ***Staff:*** *"This gives a real insight into the level of anxiety that some students encounter – I didn't realise."*

> ***Staff:*** *"Tutors need to be more available to meet students informally before the start of term in order to support this transition – perhaps we could do this during the summer or at enrolment / induction?"*

> ***Staff:*** *"Could we introduce a programme buddy scheme or work with Student Support here?"*

Logical

For the students, where teaching was clear, practical and concrete it was considered effective and staff welcomed suggestions on how to improve this.

> ***Student:*** *"To me the one of the most important things teachers can do to help students with Asperger's is to be concrete and detailed with their feedback, so I hope that the teachers… try to improve on this area.*

> ***Staff:*** *"Could we offer more opportunities for Q&A or 1:1 discussion re learning and feedback so there is no misinterpretation?"*

However, where teaching was not logical and sarcasm or irony was used, the students found this more challenging.

> ***Student:*** *"However, there were sometimes small problem areas or things that occurred that I didn't like. For instance, sometimes a teacher used a lot of humour or irony, which I often don't like from a teacher, especially if the jokes are rude or inappropriate, which to me they were at times."*

Interestingly, staff felt it might be hard to make adjustments in the language used in lectures.

> ***Staff:*** *"It would be impractical and unhelpful to discourage the use of humour in teaching as it can be a very positive tool to support and encourage the learning of other students in the room. That said, staff should be aware of the students in the room."*

> ***Staff:*** *"This is challenging as each member of staff will approach their teaching differently."*

Although there was acknowledgement of the value of using 'mean what you say' language, it was felt this might be to the detriment of other learners, who might find irony or humour engaging.

Discussion

A number of important points can be drawn from these findings. It appears that due to the 'invisible' nature of autistic spectrum conditions, members of staff are often unaware of the barriers to students' learning and their diverse needs. This lack of knowledge and understanding is experienced first-hand by the students, which accords with the findings of other studies (eg Beardon et al 2009; Hastwell et al 2012) with larger samples. One of the implications is that it is only when staff understand their students that they are able to empathise and on this basis make logical and anticipatory adjustments to their teaching. This knowledge gap was acknowledged by staff and they showed an openness and a willingness to learn. It was also clear that staff valued gaining insider perspectives from the students and were positive about finding out more about their experiences. There was some uncertainty around the

practical implications of implementing inclusive practice for autistic students, particularly where this includes meeting the diverse (and potentially conflicting) needs of all the students in a lecture hall or seminar group. This accords with the findings of Mortimore (2013) and Pearson and Koppi (2006).

Recommendations for more inclusive practice

The recommendations shown in *Figure 1* are borne out of the dialogue between the students and staff and reflect a commitment to engaging democratically in the development of more inclusive practice. They are intended to be useful for disability practitioners, university personnel, and members of teaching staff in HEIs.

Concluding comments

While it is acknowledged that this case study only reflects the experiences of autistic students and staff at one university, it is suggested that there is significant value in opening up 'dialogic spaces' (Wegerif, 2013) between autistic students and members of staff in affecting changes to teaching and learning in HEIs. In this way, students' voices and experiences are valued and heard and they become legitimate agents of change in the institution. Where staff have the opportunity to engage dialogically with students, they have been seen to approach it with openness and a willingness to learn from them. Moreover, the focus of discussion shifts from pathologising students' differences to engaging critically with their own pedagogic practice.

Figure 1: Recommendations for more inclusive practice within Higher Education Institutions

Reliable	• Ensure provision of support materials (handouts, lecture notes or PPTs) is reliable and consistent • Work towards consistency across the university in providing inclusive practice
Empathetic	• Staff should become more informed about autism spectrum conditions by engaging with the insider perspectives of autistic students • Programmes and departments should consider how they can enable students to openly discuss their learning needs and create supportive channels
Anticipatory	• Staff could consider how they might support students in the first stages of transition to university or a new course by offering to meet with students and familiarise them with the environment / teaching team • Work with other services in the university to support students socially and emotionally • Lectures / seminars should start and finish on time or information be clearly communicated where there are changes • Where possible, learning environments could be altered to ensure minimal sensory impact (light, sound, space etc.) on students
Logical	• Staff should offer clear explanations of assignments and tasks • Use language that is clear and unambiguous, where possible • Give feedback to assignments that is concrete and detailed • Offer 1:1 discussion for feedback where possible

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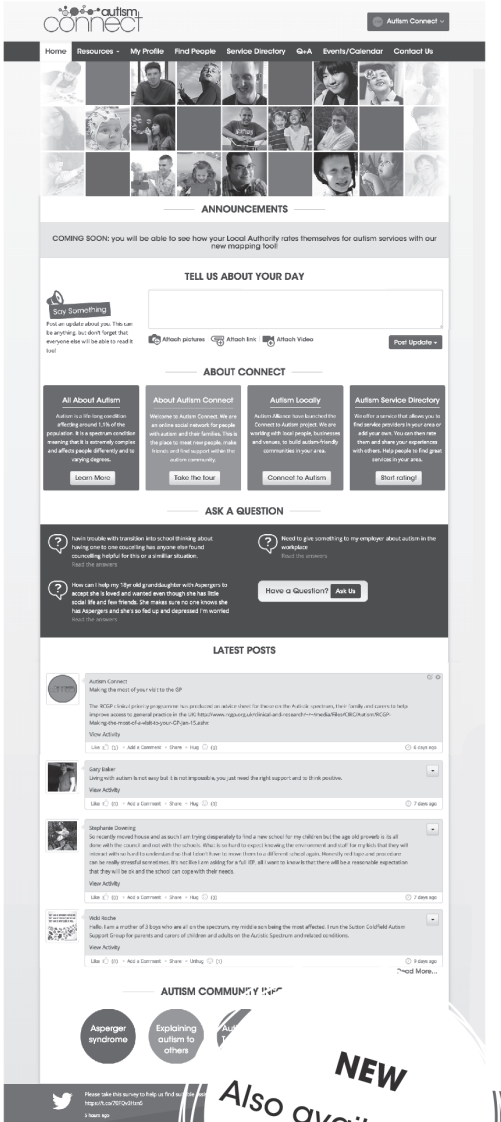
Autism Connect is the UK's first Social Network for people with autism and their families. It has been developed by Autism West Midlands with funding from the Department for Education and the Department of Health.



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